



## U.S. Advisory Support to the French, 1950-54



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General J. Lawton Collins, US Army Chief of Staff (left center), and French officials review troops near Hanoi, Oct 1951



## The Formative Years: 1950–1962

### *Introduction*

In 1950 the United States began to grant military aid to the French forces in Indochina in an effort to avert a Communist takeover of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. From that time U.S. military assistance, adapted to the increasing Communist threat, developed in three phases: military advice and assistance; operational support of the South Vietnamese armed forces; and, finally, the introduction of U.S. combat forces. The U.S. armed forces in each of these phases were fulfilling their mission under the U.S. policy of ensuring the freedom of Indochina and specifically the freedom of South Vietnam.

The direction, control, and administration of U.S. armed forces throughout this period of U.S. commitment initially was vested in a military assistance advisory group and, beginning in 1962, in the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Both headquarters had joint staffs with representatives from all the armed services. Since the U.S. Army had the largest share of the mission of advising, training, and supporting the South Vietnamese armed forces, U.S. Army representation on the joint staffs and in the field was proportionately greater than that of the other services. The U.S. Army also provided the commanders of the Military Assistance Advisory Group and the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

The U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, was a unified command, more specifically a subordinate unified command, under the Commander in Chief, Pacific. Precedents for such an arrangement are found in the command and control structures of World War II. Lessons from that experience played an important role in establishing the doctrine for unified commands that, with modifications, was applied to the Korean War and the Vietnam conflict.

### *Joint Doctrine for Unified Commands*

A unified command is a joint force of two or more service components under a single commander, constituted and designated by

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Members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, January 1954

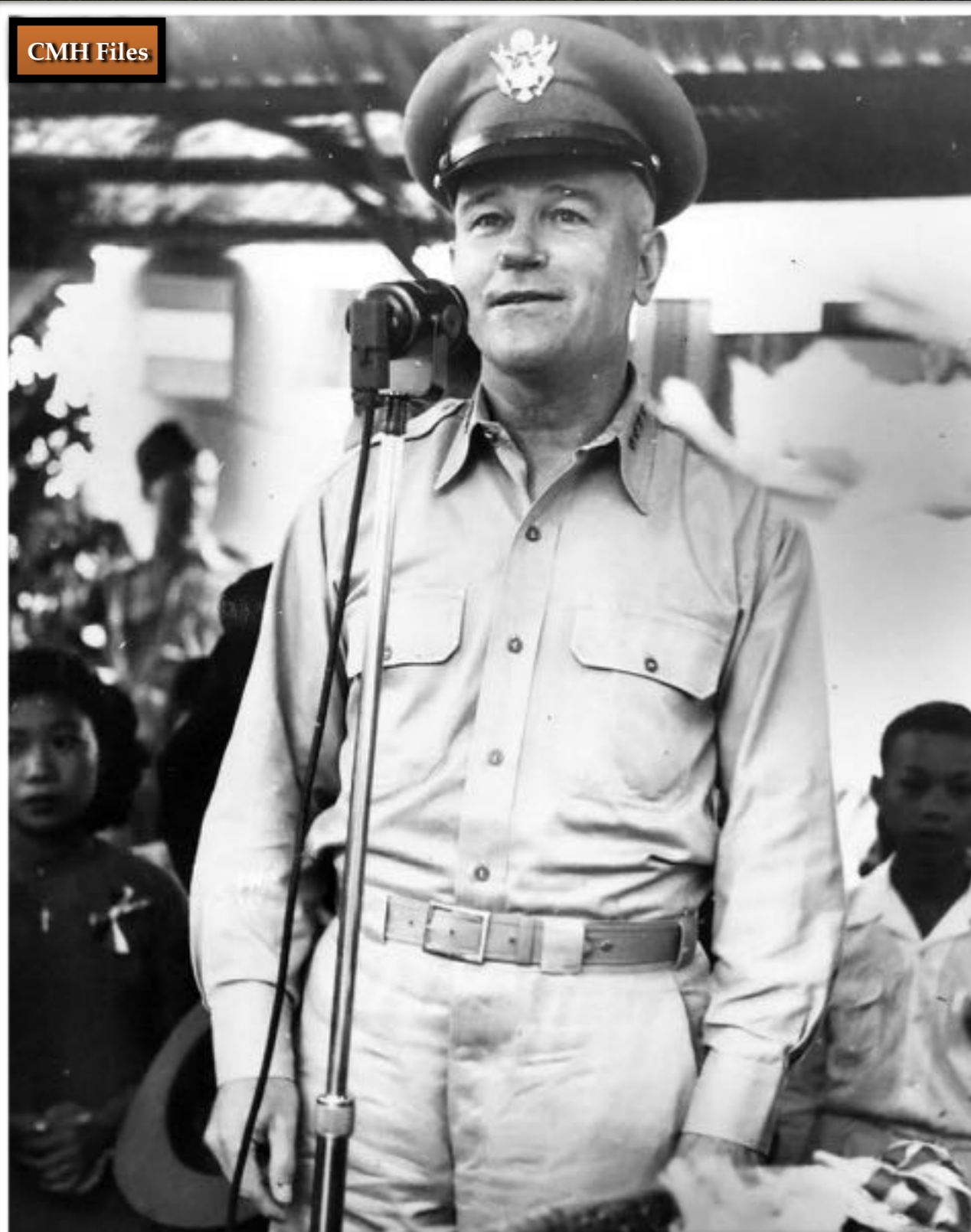
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Vice-President Richard M. Nixon inspects troops, 1953



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General J. Lawton Collins, US Army Chief of Staff, in Hanoi, Oct 1951

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the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Generally, a unified command will have a broad, continuing mission that requires execution by significant forces of two or more services under single strategic direction. This was the case in South Vietnam.

The current doctrine for unified commands is based on the National Security Act of 1947, which authorized the establishment of unified commands in the U.S. armed forces. In 1958 an amendment to the act authorized the President to establish unified commands to carry out broad and continuing operations. Developing doctrine concerning the organization and operations of U.S. unified commands is the responsibility of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The "JCS Unified Command Plan" and *JCS Publication 2: United Action Armed Forces (UNAAF)* provide the guidelines governing the responsibilities of commanders in unified (multiservice) and specified (single service) forces. These publications include doctrine for unified operations and training.

The three military departments, under their respective service secretaries, organize, train, and equip forces for assignment to unified and specified commands. It is also the responsibility of the departments to give administrative and logistical support to the forces assigned to the unified commands. One of the primary functions of the Department of the Army, for example, is to organize, train, and equip Army forces for the conduct of prompt and sustained combat operations on land in order to defeat enemy land forces and to seize, occupy, and defend land areas.

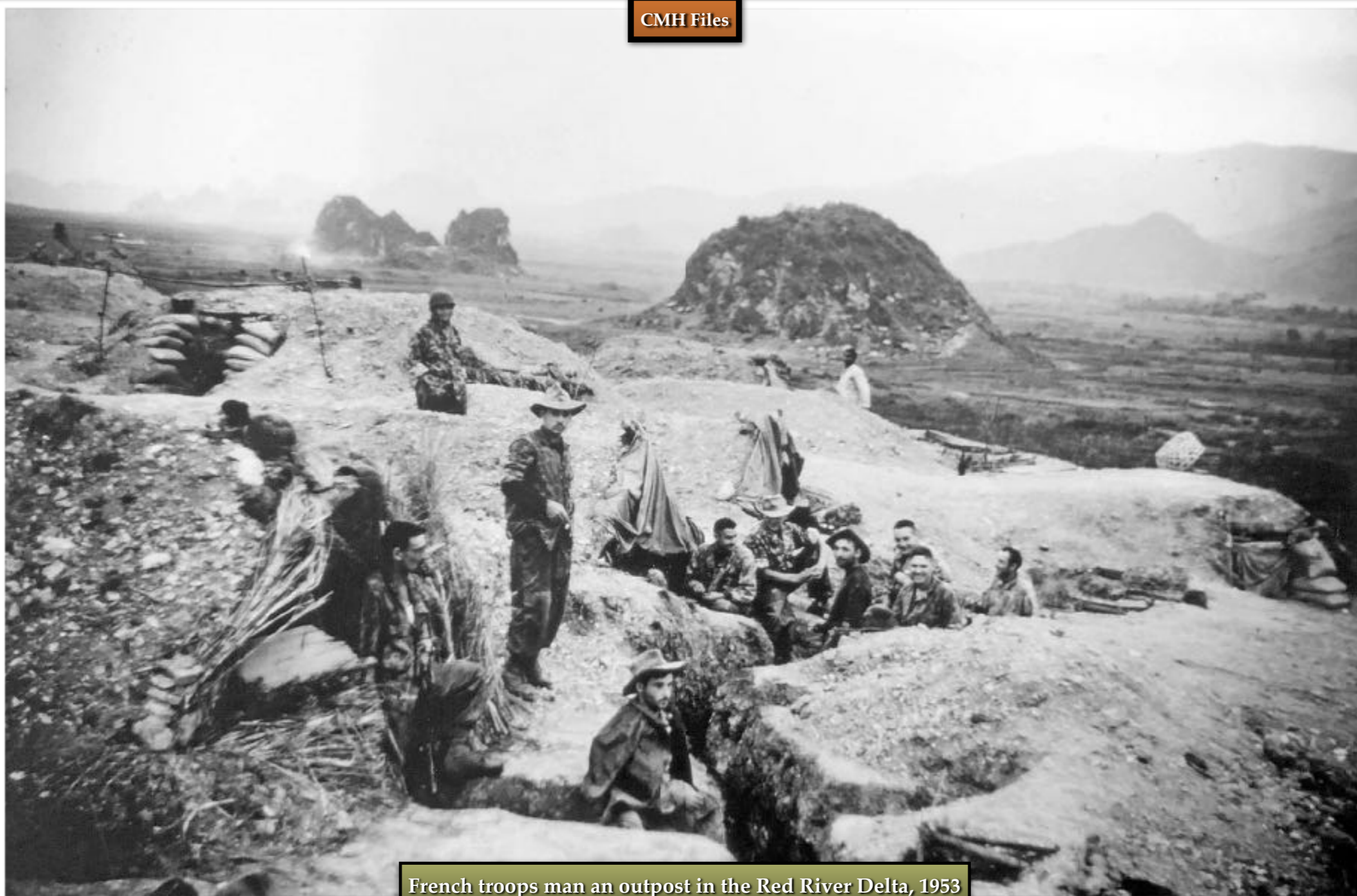
Effective application of military power requires closely integrated efforts by the individual services. It is essential, therefore, that unity of effort is maintained throughout the organizational structures as well. This goal is achieved through two separate chains of command—operational and administrative. Operational control runs from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the unified commands. The administrative-logistical chain of command runs from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the secretaries of the military departments and then to the service components of the unified commands.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff have defined the duties of unified and specified commanders who use the forces provided by the military departments. The Joint Chiefs establish policy concerning the command, organization, operations, intelligence, logistics, and administration of service forces and their training for joint operations. These guidelines also apply to subunified commands.

Army doctrine for unified commands is set forth in *FM 100-15: Larger Units, Theater Army Corps* (December 1968). In this docu-



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French troops man an outpost in the Red River Delta, 1953



ment, Army policy governing command in a theater of operations during wartime varies from that presented by the Joint Chiefs. According to the Joint Chiefs, the unified commander does not additionally serve as a commander of any service component or another subordinate command unless authorized by the establishing authority. Current Army doctrine states:

During peacetime the theater *army* commander normally commands all Army troops, activities, and installations assigned to the theater. [However] . . . during wartime, the theater commander normally withdraws from the theater army commander operational control of army combat forces, theater army air defense forces, combat support forces, and other specified units required to accomplish the theater operational mission. The theater commander, therefore, normally exercises operational command of most tactical ground forces during wartime. . . . Exceptionally, during wartime the theater commander may direct the theater army commander to retain operational control of US ground force operations. In this instance, the theater army commander provides strategic and tactical direction to field armies and other tactical forces.

Both doctrines, however, agree that the commander of a subordinate unified command set up by a unified command with approval of the Secretary of Defense has responsibilities, authorities, and functions similar to those of the commander of a unified command, established by the President.

Component and subunified commands are subordinate to the unified command in operational matters. In other words, the unified commander has operational command of these elements. The term "operational command" applies to the authority exercised by the commanders of unified commands. It is also used in other command situations such as combined commands. No commander is given more authority than he needs to accomplish his mission. The unified commander's instructions may be quite specific; the component commander, however, is usually given sufficient latitude to decide how best to use his forces to carry out the missions and tasks assigned to him by the unified commander. The subunified commander has the same authority as a unified commander over the elements in his command. The structure and organization of a subunified command are determined by the missions and tasks assigned to the commander, the volume and scope of the operations, and the forces available. With these factors in mind, the organization of a subunified command should be designed on the principles of centralized direction, decentralized execution, and common doctrine. Thus the integrity of the individual services is preserved.

Excerpt from "Advice and Support: The Early Years"

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French troops equipped with surplus US WWII vehicles



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French troops attempt to free a US surplus M-24 Chaffee light tank



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French and Vietnamese National Army soldiers with US equipment



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Excerpt from "Advice and Support: The Early Years"

## *The Beginning of U.S. Support to Vietnam*

The U.S. command and control organization for directing and administering American military assistance for Vietnam was influenced by World War II and Korean precedents. The origins of American military assistance policies developed after World War II are found in the aggressive expansionist policies of the USSR and the need to strengthen the free nations of the world, whose security was vital to the United States. Out of the U.S. resolve to assist the Free World grew the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, established after France had lost in Indochina. Since U.S. military assistance to Indochina in general and to Vietnam in particular was channeled through France during the first Indochina War (1946-1954), French influence was felt strongly in the early 1950s and also had its effect on the organization and operation of the U.S. Military Assistance Group in Indochina.

Military assistance after World War II was authorized on a regional, comprehensive scale by the Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 6 October 1949. Its chief objective was to strengthen the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, in which France was a key member. At the time, France was heavily engaged in the first Indochina War and U.S. military assistance to Southeast Asia began to increase steadily. To supplement military assistance with economic aid, the U.S. Congress a year later sanctioned technical aid to underdeveloped nations by passing the Act for International Development, popularly known as the Point Four Program. In 1951 the two acts, along with other similar measures, were consolidated in the Mutual Security Act, which was revised again in 1953 and 1954 to meet the needs of the expanding Mutual Security program. An essential condition to be met before U.S. assistance could be given under this legislation was the conclusion of bilateral agreements between the United States and the recipient nation, which included the assurances that assistance would be reciprocal, that any equipment and information furnished would be secured, and especially that equipment would not be retransferred without U.S. consent.

Since it was the policy of the United States to support the peaceful and democratic evolution of nations toward self-government and independence, the State of Vietnam and the kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia could not receive U.S. military assistance as long as they were ruled by France. Not until February 1950, after the French parliament had ratified agreements granting a



degree of autonomy to the Associated States of Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) within the French Union, could the U.S. government recognize these states and respond to French and Vietnamese requests for military and economic aid.

*MAAG, Indochina: The Forerunner*

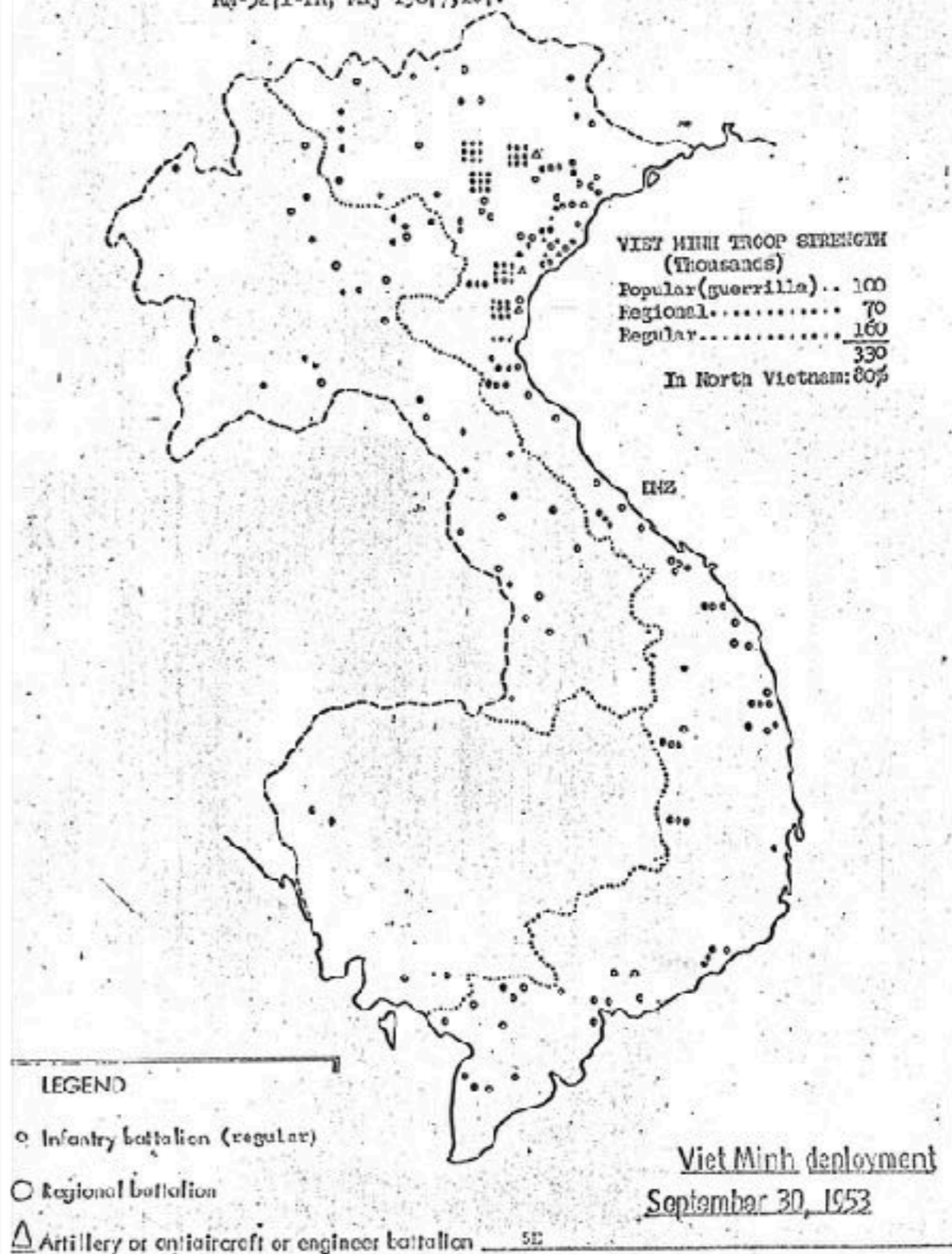
On 8 May 1950 Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson concluded consultations with the French government in Paris and announced that the situation in Southeast Asia warranted both economic aid and military equipment for the Associated States of Indochina and for France. To supervise the flow of military assistance, Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall approved the establishment of a small military assistance advisory group. Total authorized strength at the time of its activation was 128 men. The first members of the group arrived in Saigon on 3 August 1950. After the necessary organizational tasks were completed, a provisional detachment—Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Indochina—was organized on 17 September and assembled in the Saigon-Cholon area on 20 November 1950. The original structure, though temporary, provided for service representation by setting up Army, Navy, and Air Force sections within the group.

Military aid agreements between the United States and the governments of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and France were signed in Saigon on 23 December 1950. Known as the Pentilateral Agreements, these accords formed the basis of U.S. economic and military support. U.S. military assistance was administered by the newly constituted Military Assistance Advisory Group, Indochina. Its first chief was Brigadier General Francis G. Brink, who had assumed command on 10 October 1950. General Brink's main responsibility was to manage the U.S. military assistance program for Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and to provide logistical support for the French Union forces. Military training of Vietnamese units remained in the hands of the French Expeditionary Corps, and personnel of the U.S. advisory group had little, if any, influence and no authority in this matter. Because of this restriction, the chief function of the Military Assistance Advisory Group during the early years of U.S. commitment in Indochina was to make sure that equipment supplied by the United States reached its prescribed destination and that it was properly maintained by French Union forces.

On 31 July 1952 General Brink was succeeded as chief of the advisory group by Major General Thomas J. H. Trapnell, who held this position for almost two years. The U.S. chain of command during 1950–1954 ran from the President, as Commander in Chief,

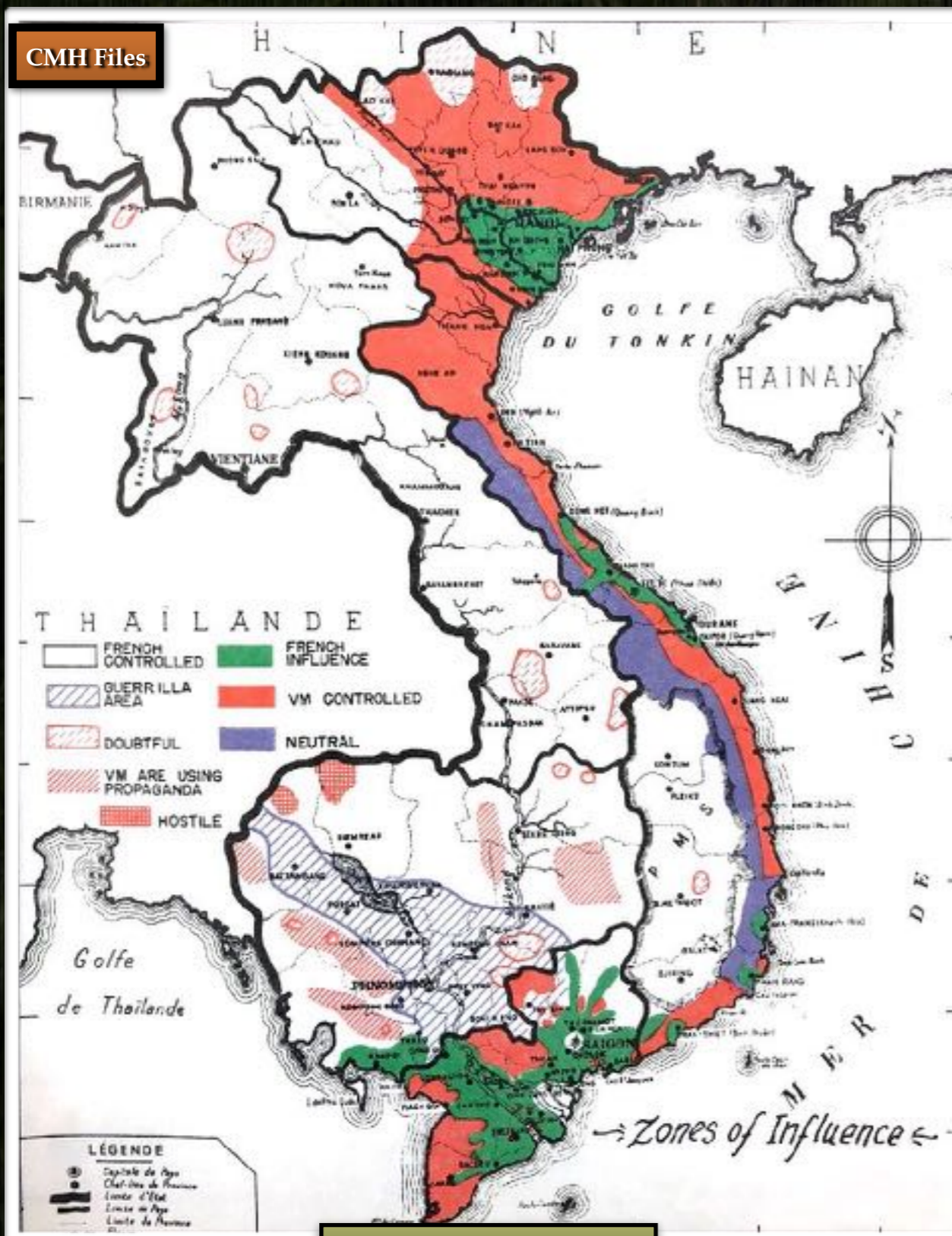
Excerpt from "Advice and Support: The Early Years"

Source: V.J. Croizat, trans., *A Translation from the French: Lessons of the War in Indochina* (Santa Monica: RAND Corp., RM-5271-PR, May 1967), 107.

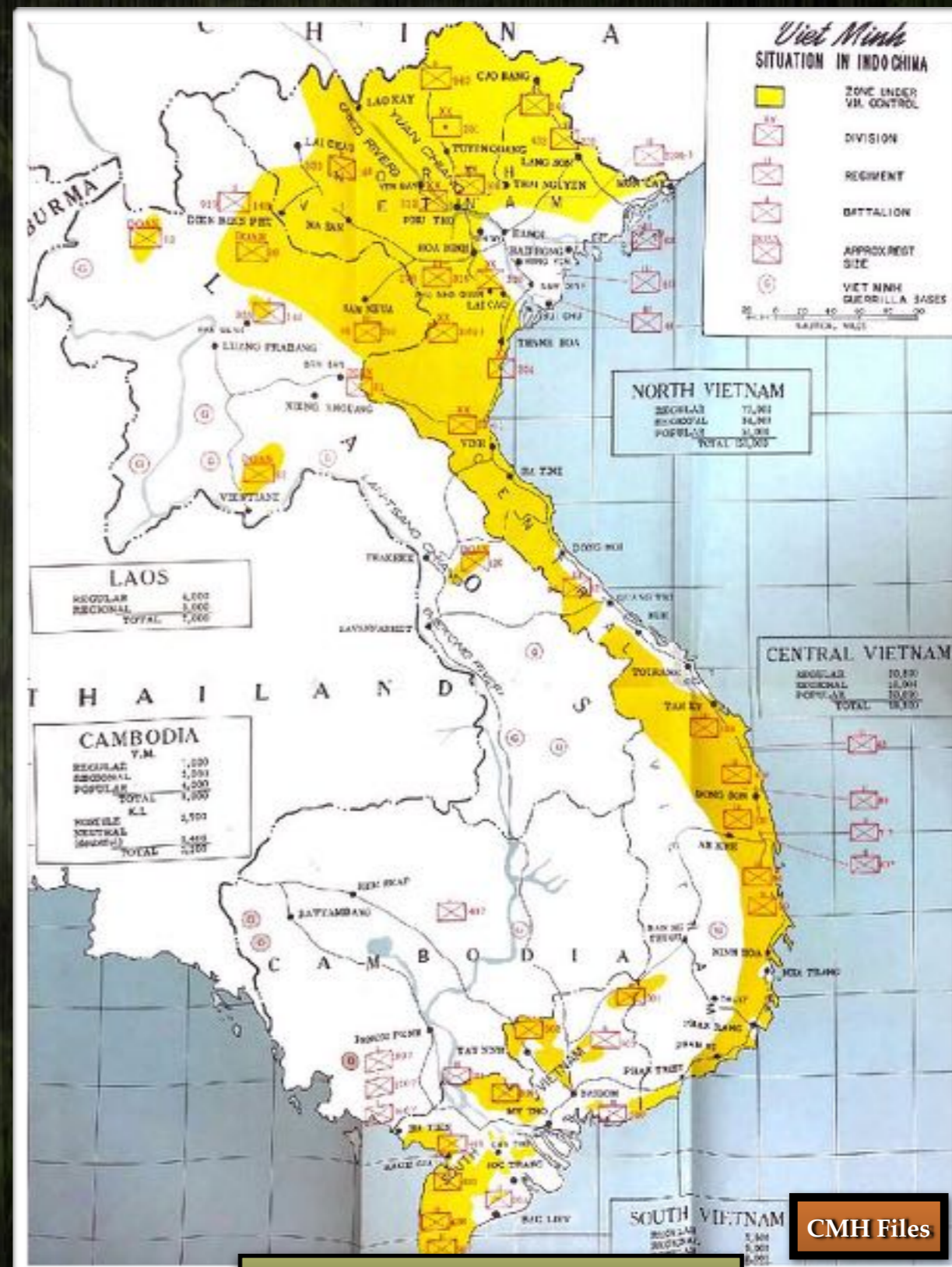




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Zones of Influence, 1953



Viet Minh order of battle, early 1954

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French colonial troops attack at Phu Ly, 1951

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Viet Minh artillery

Excerpt from "Advice and Support: The Early Years"



GENERAL BRINK



GENERAL TRAPNELL

to the Department of the Navy (acting as executive agency), to the Commander in Chief, Pacific, and then to the chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Indochina. Early in this period, the chiefs of the advisory groups dealt mainly with the Commander in Chief, Pacific, but when the war began to go badly for the French, higher authorities in Washington, including the President, took a more immediate interest. Increasingly, Washington became concerned about the effectiveness of U.S. military aid to the French Union forces, the expansion of the Vietnamese National Army, and the conduct of the war.

To assess the value and effectiveness of U.S. military aid and to try to exert influence in at least some proportion to the growing U.S. commitment, Admiral Arthur W. Radford, Commander in Chief, Pacific, sent Lieutenant General John W. O'Daniel, Commanding General, U.S. Army, Pacific, on three trips to Indochina. General O'Daniel's visits were made after General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny had been replaced by General Raoul Salan on 1 April 1952, and after General Henri-Eugène Navarre had succeeded General Salan in May of the following year. General O'Daniel's efforts to observe the activities of the French command were only moderately successful. In no way was he able to influence either plans or operations.



General Navarre realized from the beginning that the French Union forces were overextended and tied to defensive positions. He therefore developed a military plan, subsequently named after him, that called for expanding the Vietnamese National Army and assigning it the defensive missions, thus releasing French forces for mobile operations. General Navarre also intended to form more light mobile battalions, and he expected reinforcements from France. With additional U.S. arms and equipment for his forces, Navarre planned to hold the Red River Delta and Cochinchina while building up his mobile reserves. By avoiding decisive battles during the dry season from October 1953 to April 1954, Navarre hoped to assemble his mobile strike forces for an offensive that by 1955 would result in a draw at least. The military plan had a pacification counterpart that would secure the areas under Viet Minh influence.

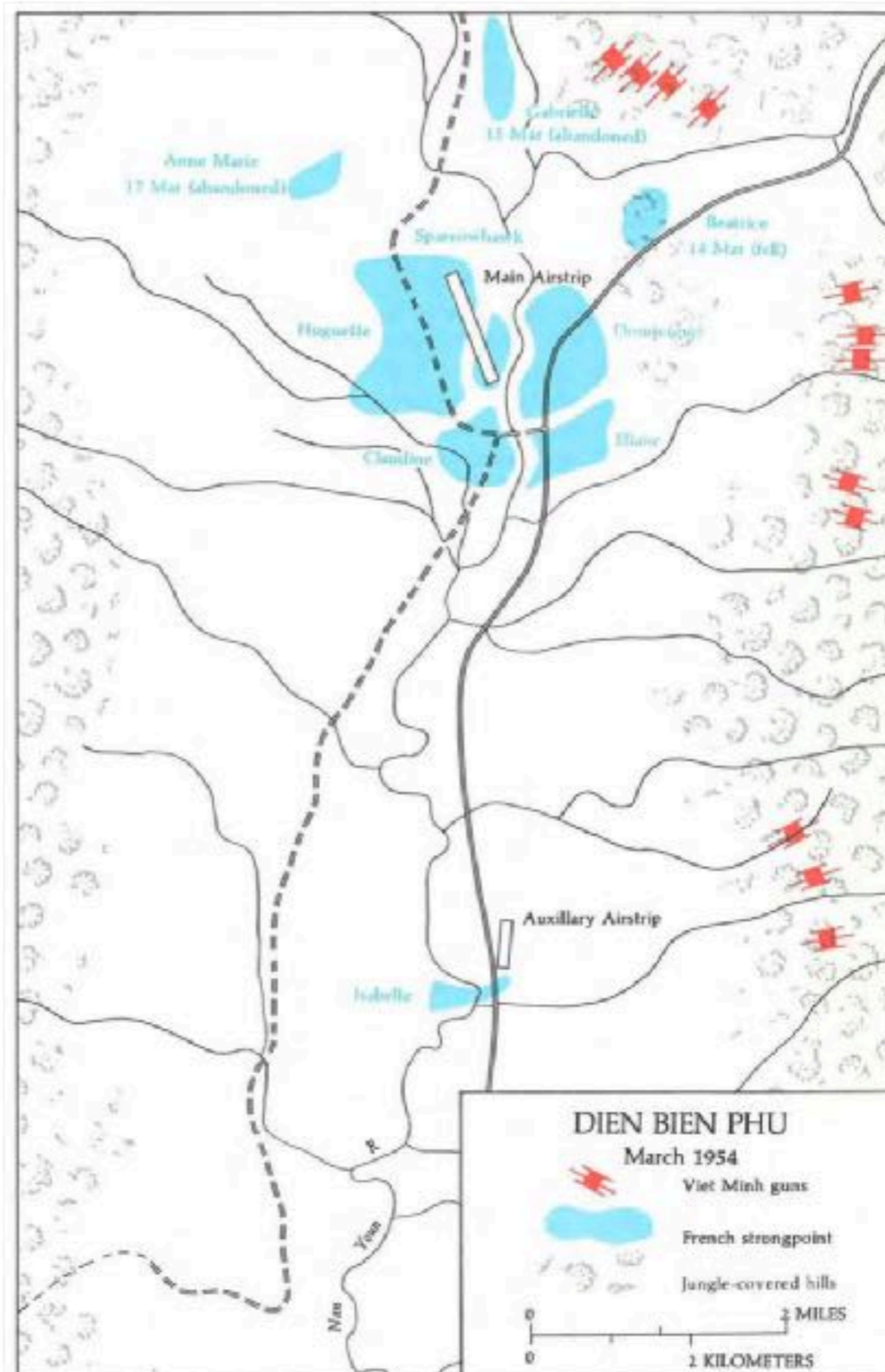
His plans were unsuccessful, however, despite increased U.S. shipments of arms and equipment. The French politely but firmly prevented American advisers and General O'Daniel from intervening in what they considered their own business. Following instructions from Paris to block the Communist advance into Laos, General Navarre in November 1953 decided to occupy and defend Dien Bien Phu. This fatal decision was based on grave miscalculations, and the Viet Minh overran Dien Bien Phu on 8 May 1954. Their tactical victory marked the end of effective French military operations in the first Indochina War, although fighting continued until 20 July, the date the Geneva Accords were signed.

Excerpt from "Advice and Support: The Early Years"

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Viet Minh soldiers victorious at Dien Bien Phu





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Viet Minh and French officials oversee transfer of power in Hanoi



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The negotiation room in Paris for the Geneva Accords

Excerpt from "The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the First Indochina War, 1947-1954"

## *The Geneva Accords*

The Geneva Accords of 20 July 1954 officially ended the fighting in Indochina. As a condition for its participation in the Geneva conference, the United States stipulated that an armistice agreement must at least preserve the southern half of Vietnam. This prerequisite was fulfilled by dividing Vietnam at the 17th parallel. The Geneva agreement also gave independence to Laos and Cambodia. Neither the United States nor the government of South Vietnam formally acknowledged the Geneva Accords, but in a separate, unilateral declaration the United States agreed to adhere to the terms of the agreements.

Some of the provisions contained in articles of the Geneva agreements were to have unforeseen and lasting effects on the organization and application of U.S. military assistance and on the developing command and control arrangements of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group. Among these provisions was Article 16, which prohibited the introduction into Vietnam of troops and other military personnel that had not been in the country at the time of the cease-fire. The provision also fixed the number of advisers in the military assistance group at 888, the total number of

French and Americans in the country on the armistice date. Of the total, the French representation consisted of 262 advisers with the military assistance group and 284 with the Vietnamese Navy and Air Force. Of the 342 Americans only 128 were advisers, as originally authorized before the cease-fire. The remaining spaces were filled on an emergency basis, temporarily with fifteen officers, newly assigned, and almost two hundred Air Force technicians. These technicians were in Vietnam because they had accompanied forty aircraft given to the French early in 1954. Even though the U.S. advisory role in Vietnam was about to change drastically, the magic figure of 342 was on the board and would be difficult to alter.

Articles 17-19 contained restrictions regarding weapons, equipment, ammunition, bases, and military alliances. Shipment of new types of arms, ammunition, and materiel was forbidden. Only on a piece-by-piece basis could worn-out or defective items be replaced, and then only through designated control points. Neither North nor South Vietnam was to establish new military bases, nor could any foreign power exercise control over a military base in Vietnam. Furthermore, neither the North nor the South was to enter into any military alliance or allow itself to be used as an instrument for the resumption of hostilities.